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Bronze Age in Atlantic France around 1600BC

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Despite a great number of new information recently provided by preventive archaeology operations, the data concerning 16th century Atlantic France (*i. e.* the transition between Early and Middle Bronze Age) still remain very scarce. For most of the concerned areas, only data about the world of the dead and the depositional practice of bronze material are truly abundant.

Chrono-cultural correlations

Correlations between the Atlantic world's cultures -particularly in the French area- and those of Middle and even Mediterranean Europe could only be established through radiocarbon dating (though many of them, in particular the earliest ones, are marred by ranges too wide to be *de facto* useful for the drawing up of a precise chronology), and through the traditional but effective cross dating method. We will not discuss this problem again, which has been already dealt by several authors (in particular Briard 1965; Pautreau 1979; Blanchet 1984; Gomez de Soto 1980 and 1995) and recently re-examined by S. Gerloff, who has provided reliable correlation tables between the Atlantic, north-alpine and Mediterranean worlds (Gerloff 2007). The hypothesis of a supposed contemporaneity between the Treboul metallic horizon in Armorica, the metallic horizons from the same period in the Channel-North Sea area, the beginning of the Duffaits culture in continental Centre-West and the Bz B-phase of the *Hügelgräberkultur* (Gomez de Soto, 1995) was confirmed by the recent dating of some Southern Germany burials (Mühler & Lohrke 2009). Correlations between the South of Great-Britain and the countries of the Channel and North Sea areas on the mainland are now also well established (Rowlands 1976; Marcigny & Ghesquière 2003; Marcigny *et al.* 2007).

Elite burials, from Early to Middle Bronze Age

3rd millennium BC: the beginnings

Whereas the populations of the traditional Atlantic cultures remain faithful to multiple consecutive tombs, the contemporaneous Bell Beakers re-introduce the single burial tradition. These burials are often located in the internal area of some ditched circular enclosures, the first occurrence of a type which will last until the end of the Last Iron Age. The central pit from La Folie enclosure in Poitiers (Vienne) contained a single individual with a Rhine-type AOO beaker and two debitage products (Tcheremissinoff *et al.* 2000) (fig.1). On the other hand, the double burial from Les Bouilloires at Saint-Martin-du-Fraigneau (Vendée) contained two male individuals, one with the traditional bellbeaker package (copper dagger and archer's bracer), and the other with no preserved material (André 1998, 120) (fig. 2). This second grave raises the question of the relative status of the two deceased deposited in it and

of the existence of social inequalities, maybe in terms of a socially dominant /accompanying dead relationship (Testard 2004)?

Some Bell Beaker burials, for instance in Trizay (Charente-Maritime) or Thiré (Vendée), have yielded some tiny gold artefacts which herald those found in some Early Bronze Age barrows from Armorica or northern Aquitaine.

Early Bronze Age: a high funerary visibility for the privileged

In the burial mounds of the “princelets of Armorica”, in the words of Jacques Briard (1984), can be found chambers made up of stone slabs or dry-stone low walls, sometime also funerary houses in perishable building material. Some of these chambers have yielded luxurious grave goods, such as daggers with a wooden hilt decorated with thousands of little gold nails and discs (Kernonen in Plouvorn, Finistère: fig.3), short swords (Motta in Lannion, Côtes-d’Armor), low-flanged axes, ornaments in Baltic amber, ceremonial arrowheads, sometimes luxurious metallic wares, for instance the silver beaker from Brun-Bras in Saint-Adrien in Côtes-d’Armor (Briard 1984; Gabillot 2010; Nicolas 2011).

The origin of barrow practice may date back to the transition period between Bell Beakers and Early Bronze Age, but burial mounds that could possibly date from this period are very scarce and were formerly excavated, thus providing very few information. Their chronological attribution remains therefore debatable. Nevertheless, continuity between the two periods is indubitable: theogival ceremonial arrowheads for instance and other high-quality productions, which can be considered as knapped flint masterpieces, undoubtedly come from the Bell Beakers’ square-eared arrowheads (fig. 4); the silver beaker from Saint-Adrien (fig. 5) recalls the form of a ceramic handled beaker from the Middle Rhine Bell Beakers, variants of which are known as far as the Atlantic area. As already mentioned too, the single burial spreads with the Bell Beakers only.

There is no need to cite a remote Baltic origin for those buried in the barrows or their culture, as it used to be done formerly, but long-distance relationships existed anyway: the funerary house in tumulus 2 of Saint-Just (Bourbriac, Côtes-d’Armor) (fig. 6), which recalls the Leubingen one in Saxony, shows possible links with the Baltic Sea countries. Links exist also with the South of England, where the highly-related Wessex culture expands at the same period (Gerloff, 1975 & 2007; Briard 1987) and with the Iberian Peninsula where some silver ornaments may have come from.

Some stone cists were also used at the same time as barrows. They contain seemingly less luxurious goods but remain elite burials: some cists on the Groix Island as well as one in Plouhinec (Finistère) have yielded remarkable faience beads (Briard 1984).

Burials containing rich goods similar to those known in Armorica -in particular ceremonial arrowheads and bronze daggers- and dating from the same period can also be found in Normandy (Delrieu 2006, 122).

This princely funerary phenomenon, which is so obvious in Armorica, has a parallel in other regions in Western France, such as Aquitaine. The deceased from the Singleyrac grave (Dordogne) was buried with rich grave goods (fig. 7): a decorated biconical vessel, the style of which is common in northern Aquitaine and the Centre-West and recalls the potteries from the Armorican barrows; a probably low-flanged axe; a metal-hilted dagger, maybe of Rhodian or Italic type; some gold spirals (Déchelette 1910, 142). This funerary equipment is similar to the one from most of Armorica and Wessex’s richest barrows. Other less munificent barrows can nevertheless be noted for high-quality weapons: a halberd blade from Eynesse (Gironde), dagger blades quite similar to some Armorican ones from Sauliac-sur-Célé (Lot) and possibly Castelnau-de-Médoc (Gironde). Lastly, in the area of Sainte-Foy-la-

Grande, on the borders of Gironde and Dordogne, some cists have yielded metal axes (Chevillot 1989).

In the Centre-West, elites are less visible in funerary contexts. There are no barrows with wealthy burials, just ditched circular enclosures with a central burial that come from the Bell Beaker tradition (fig. 8 & 9). When preserved, the grave goods seem to be always very modest (Barbier 1998; Coupey & Gomez de Soto, to be published). As for the cists and some Armorican barrows, it would be an error to consider them as poor burials. The dead found in multiple consecutive burials in karstic caves probably had a much modest status.

During the Middle Bronze Age: other ways of funerary representing the elites

Going by their grave goods, the Armorican barrows have been classified in two categories that were long considered to follow one other chronologically: those of the “first serie” contained bronze weapons and rich goods, those of the “second” one hold only potteries, among which the typical four-handled vessel. Interpreting these two series in terms of chronology is now only partially valid, as radiocarbon dating has in some cases provided the same early dates for both. But radiocarbon dating also confirms that a great number of pottery burials actually date from the Middle Bronze Age (Briard 1984; Roussot-Larroque 2010, 197; Gabillot 2010).

Though this old chronological vision is not completely obsolete, other patterns must be considered as well, such as a selection based on sex (but the Armorican and Normand grounds are acid and destroy almost all the bones, which makes it impossible to establish a diagnosis), or even on ethnical criteria (this could be partly confirmed by a study of the barrows’ geographical distribution), etc. Some chambers too have no preserved material at all. Considering them as burials of lower-ranking people is not valid either, as some perishable goods may have possessed a high symbolical content or a higher social value than others still preserved (there are many ethnographical examples). The time spent for building the tomb also attests to the social importance of the deceased.

Barrows are still erected in Armorica during the Middle Bronze Age, but the burials contain only ceramics and rare goods such as metal artifacts, amber or faience beads are lacking. Some stone cist graves without any goods could possibly date from this period (Briard 1984).

The transition between Early and Middle Bronze Age in Armorica thus shows major changes in the funerary practices.

The situation is similar in Normandy or in the regions south of the Loire River, where some ditched circular enclosures have supposedly contained destroyed barrows. These mounds are not factually attested and most structures might have been used for religious practices rather than for funerary ones, or at least used *in the first place* for a religious purpose. When burials are found in these enclosures, they contain no goods at all.

In karstic areas, burial deposits in caves continue into the Middle Bronze Age. During this period, the dead are henceforth carefully selected. The multiple consecutive deposits of the Early Bronze Age evolve from the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age into deposits of one or a small number of individuals, at least in the Duffaits culture area, the only one for which we have precise data (Gomez de Soto, 1995, 132; Boulestin & Gomez de Soto 2005). As in other karstic areas (the young “princess” from the Collier Cave in Lastours, Aude, being a remarkably significant example) a funerary deposit in a cave does not mean a lower social rank: in the Duffaits cave, some funerary deposits contained bronze ornaments as well as many Baltic amber beads; one of these deposits, which yielded nearly two hundred amber beads, also contained a blue glass bead of central-European origin (fig. 10). Regarding these

burials in karstic environment, the contrast is huge between the Early Bronze Age deposits, composed mainly of ceramics and often lacking any other category of goods, and the rich Middle Bronze Age deposits.

Dryland and wetland metal hoards

Metal hoards appear at the end of the Neolithic/Chalcolithic period and this practice remains very well attested in Atlantic France during the whole Bronze Age (Briard 1965; Coffyn, 1972; Pautreau 1979; Gomez de Soto, 1980 and 1995; Blanchet 1984; Chevillot 1989; Gabillot 2003; Pennors 2004; Lagarde-Cardona 2012; Mélin 2011).

It has long been recognized that the hoards found in the ground (known as “terrestrial” or drylandhoards) had been deliberately buried. The same deliberate nature has long been debated but is now definitively proved as well for most of the submerged objects found in damp environments, in running or stagnant waters such as marshes or peat bogs (Mélin 2011). We will not debate once again here the meaning of these hoards; for most of them, the utilitarian interpretation has now given way to a vision of religious or other social practices: it is now clearly established that the composition of dryland or wetland hoards has varied a lot in time and space following binding codes.

The number of hoards also varies a lot according to the Bronze Age phases. The number of hoards increases clearly in the MBA I/Bz B-phases; this concerns the terrestrial hoards from the Tréboul Armorican horizon and the parallels from the Channel and North Sea countries, the Centre-West and the Aquitaine, as well as the submerged hoards. The rise is even more marked during MBA II/Bz C-phases (Mélin 2011) (fig.11).

As for funerary practices, the 16th century shows drastic changes in the social and ritual practices.

Continuity factors?

Indication of continuity between Early Bronze Age and MBA I/Bz C-phases can be seen in several fields, at least in the regions where the data are sufficient: continuity for instance in the Armorican metallic production (Briard 1965), or the ceramic production in Normandy (Marcigny et Ghesquière 2003), Armorica (Roussot-Larroque 2010) or Centre-West (Gomez de Soto 1995). Long-distance relationships still exist, particularly across the Channel between Brittany, Normandy and England (Rowlands 1976; Marcigny & Ghesquière 2003; Marcigny *et al.* 2007). South of the Loire River, in continental Centre-West and northern Aquitaine, solid links are established from the MBA I/Bz B-phases with the *Hügelgräberkultur* area which is at the root of an unequalled flow of luxurious goods as well as stylistic and technological exchanges (Gomez de Soto 1995). On the other hand, the Médoc and Saintonge areas keep their originality, as the style of its ceramic production in particular shows signs of certain conservatism (Gomez de Soto 1995).

As afore written, on the contrary information concerning the ways of life -land use, settlements structure, economy, etc.- remain scarce for most of the Atlantic France area despite new elements provided by the development of preventive archaeology research. Exception is made for Normandy where a strong continuity in land use traditions has been observed, for instance on Tatihou Island (Marcigny & Ghesquière 2003).

Conclusion

Despite very poor data, though varying a lot according to the areas and/or to certain aspects of the functioning of human societies, it is still possible to give a quick outline of 16th century BC Atlantic France, during the transition between the chrono-cultural phases known as Early Bronze Age and MBA I, equivalent to Bz A2 and Bz B-phases in the chronology used for Germany and Central Europe.

Continuities are obvious and, which is not surprising, they concern mainly the populations' ways of everyday life and their productions.

On the other hand, some discontinuity phenomena are also visible. They deeply affect the funerary practices, particularly for the elites whose grave goods sometimes betray a lower visibility, for instance in Brittany and the Channel countries (of course, this discretion did not imply the social effacement of the elites, who found new ways of ostentatious display, for instance by burying goods), or on the contrary a greater ostentation, as for the Duffaits culture in the continental Centre-West. Ritual practices are also affected by this discontinuity, as shown by the remarkable development of the hoarding practice and the great number of metallic artifacts buried in the ground and of bronze or precious metal items immersed in damp environments.

It clearly stands out that the years around 1600/1550 BC brought drastic changes in the ideological and social systems in Atlantic France as well as in the entire Middle Europe. Could it possibly have been a long-distance consequence of the remote upheavals in the Aegean world for an already largely integrated Europe?

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Captions

Fig. 1: La Folie, Poitiers, Vienne. Bell Beaker period grave. Right in top: AOO ornamented beaker from the grab (drawing Y. Tcheremissinoff & others 2000, p. 165-6, fig. 1 & 2).

Fig. 2: Les Bouilloires, Saint-Martin-de-Fraigneau, Vendée. Double Bell Beaker period grave. Green: copper dagger & stone wrist guard (drawing M. Coutureau, in André 1998, p. 121).

Fig. 3: **(before: fig.1)**: Kernonen barrow, Plouvorn (Finistère). Early Bronze Age. Part of the grave goods still in position. Content of a wooden chest: three bronze daggers, bronze ring-headed pin and wheel-headed pin. In the upper right thumbnail: reconstitution of the gold nails ornament of one of the daggers' hilt (drawing Y. Onnée, in Briard 1984, fig. 56, p. 91).

Fig. 4: Kernonen barrow, Plouvorn (Finistère). Early Bronze Age. Part of the grave goods still in position. Content of a wooden chest: flint arrow heads & amber wrist guard (photo. J. Briard, in Briard 1970, p. 41, fig. 17).

Fig. 5: Brun-Bras barrow, Saint-Adrien (Côtes-d'Armor). Early Bronze Age. Silver gobelet (photo. RGZM, in Briard 1978, taf. 5).

Fig. 6: Saint-Jude barrow, Bourbiac (Côtes-d'Armor). Early Bronze Age. Model (photo. Daoulas Abbey, in Delrieux 2006, p. 123).

Fig. 7: **(before: fig.2)**: Grave goods from the Singleyrac burial, Dordogne. Early Bronze Age (drawing A. de Gourgues, in Déchelette 1910, fig. 41, p. 142).

Fig. 8: Les Marais, Puyréaux, Charente. Bronze & Iron Age necropolis & cultural place. The arrow indicates the Early Bronze Age funeral enclosure (photo. P. Joy, in Coupey & Gomez de Soto, to be published).

Fig. 9: Les Marais, Puyréaux, Charente. Early Bronze Age enclosure: the primarily central grave (photo. A.-S. Coupey, in Coupey & Gomez de Soto, to be published).

Fig. 10: **(before: fig.3)**: The Duffaits cave, La Rochette, Charente. Middle Bronze Age. Part of the grave goods from the funerary assemblage 2.299: blue glass; 123, 124 and 147: bronze; other items: amber (drawings J. Gomez de Soto in Gomez de Soto 1973, fig. 16, p. 418).

Fig. 11: **(before: fig.4)**: Evolution of the deposits in damp environments in France, from Chalcolithic to First Iron Age. Real time scale curve of the theoretical number of deposits per generation (drawing M. Mélin in Mélin 2011, fig. III-1-6, p. 328).